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Feature Story

CARTOONIST'S "DUCK STAMP" IDEA SPURS GROWTH OF NATION'S WILDLIFE REFUGES

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For nearly three decades, Jay N. "Ding" Darling of the Des Moines Register ranked as one of the nation's top political cartoonists. To conservationists, however, he'll always be best remembered as "the father of the Duck Stamp."

It was Darling who led the campaign that convinced Congress in the Depression year of 1934 to authorize an annual Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp. Today, half a century later, the Duck Stamp program has preserved some 3.5 million acres of precious waterfowl wetlands habitat.

In the process, notes Interior Secretary William Clark, "the Duck Stamp helped build the National Wildlife Refuge System with millions of dollars provided by American sportsmen and women." Indeed, more than 285 million of these Duck Stamp dollars over the past 50 years have helped to buy all or parts of 186 of the nation's more than 400 national wildlife refuges and thousands of acres of "waterfowl production areas."

America's waterfowl were in deep trouble in the early 1930's when Ding Darling and other conservationists took up their cause. Commercial hunting had hurt bird populations, but what hurt even more was the wholesale draining of tens of millions of wetlands for agriculture. The reclaimed marshes, shallow lakes, and ponds often made only marginal farmland. But they had been critical to waterfowl--for nesting, breeding, and wintering. The problems were further aggravated by years of devastating drought that had left marshes and ponds dry and turned much of the nation's mid-section into a vast "dust bowl."

Darling, an avid duck hunter, had watched prime nesting habitat in his native Iowa decline and disappear. He feared that, if nothing were done, America's spectacular waterfowl resources would vanish. Using his skills and popularity as a cartoonist, he repeatedly spotlighted the worsening situation.

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt responded by naming Darling to a three-man wildlife restoration committee, along with famed ecologist Aldo Leopold and magazine editor Tom Beck. What was needed, the group quickly concluded, was $50 million to purchase threatened waterfowl habitat.

When the President persuaded Darling to head up the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Biological Survey (forerunner of today's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), the pressing need for funds suddenly became his full-time preoccupation. The National Wildlife Refuge System, launched in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt, had limped along for decades because of inadequate financing.

Within a matter of months, the crusading cartoonist had tapped WPA rehabilitation funds, drought relief funds, and a variety of other programs to amass $8.5 million for emergency purchases of wetlands. As Darling put it, he was using "a straw to suck funds for wildlife out of the other fellow's barrel." But since the nation was mired in a depression, he knew that the "other fellow's barrel" could quickly run dry.

A permanent source of dollars was necessary to buy and preserve vanishing waterfowl habitat, one that didn't depend on the uncertainties of Congressional appropriations. Darling set about galvanizing public opinion behind the idea of an annual duck stamp. One of his close colleagues, biologist Ira Gabrielson, later wrote, "His ability to dramatize in a few words the plight of wild creatures furnished the slogans with which the growing conservation army went to battle."

That "battle" climaxed on March 16, 1934, when Congress enacted the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act which came to be known as the Duck Stamp law. Under the new law, every waterfowl hunter 16 years of age or older had to buy a Federal Duck Stamp. The revenues generated by the annual stamp sales went into a special Migratory Bird Conservation Fund to be used to buy and lease waterfowl habitat.

The first year's Duck Stamp, drawn by Darling himself, showed a pair of mallards alighting in a marsh. According to one story, he'd been asked to submit an idea for a design and dashed off a preliminary sketch. Later, Darling learned that his sample design had been turned into a stamp by the Bureau of Engraving. Fearing that his quick "sketch" would hurt sales, he was reportedly irate. But he need not have worried. The initial Duck Stamp was a success, with 635,000 sold at $1 apiece. With wetlands going for as little as 77 cents per acre, the proceeds represented a lot of potential habitat.

During those early years, big tracts of land could be bought cheaply. And the habitat acquisition program was more or less an exercise in damage control. The vast marshland areas of the Great Plains and southern Canada were largely devastated--either drained or ravaged by drought. So the new flow of Duck Stamp revenues and emergency funds went mostly to preserve or restore remaining waterfowl breeding grounds. The new refuges served two purposes--providing nesting habitat for species such as mallards, pintails, and gadwalls that breed in the lower 48 States, and providing feeding areas for geese, swans, and species of ducks that nest north of the U.S./Canadian border.

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Many early conservationists believed that the mere creation of these refuges would be enough to conserve waterfowl. But, as one-time Fish and Wildlife Service Director Ira Gabrielson later wrote, "Experience and observation have proved...conclusively that 'sanctuaries' are not the sole passport to wildlife heaven." As it turned out, managers of the new refuges often had to work to improve and restore habitat.

Some of the areas purchased with Duck Stamp dollars had been drained or otherwise devastated. For a number of years, Duck Stamp money was also used to restore and improve habitat. Dikes were constructed to hold back sufficient water to create more wetlands. Sometimes fields were burned to enhance the growth of new vegetation so savored by ducks and geese. Some fields were planted in corn, winter wheat, and rye to supply more food for the great flocks of birds. And refuge forests were managed to encourage the growth of nuttall and other red oaks that produced many acorns for wintering birds.

Such techniques not only restored damaged areas but also improved the productivity of other new refuges. As wetlands continued to be destroyed and wildlife became even more dependent on refuges, habitat management increased in importance. Since 1958, however, Duck Stamp money has been used only to acquire new refuge lands; funds for restoring and managing habitat now come from other sources.

As time went by, waterfowl populations slowly recovered. And it became clearer to biologists that the birds needed protection and good feeding grounds over the winter if healthy numbers were to survive and return north to nest and reproduce each spring. Accordingly, new wintering areas were added to the growing refuge system in the southern coastal wetlands and bottomland swamps. Meanwhile, areas where the birds could rest and feed were acquired along the four great north-south migration "flyways."

Another waterfowl crisis had welled up by the 1970's, one spawned by modern farming techniques and increased pressures for greater farm production. The prairie "pothole" regions of the upper Midwest were being drained for agriculture at an ever-increasing rate. And it was in these regions, pockmarked by thousands of shallow, water-filled depressions left by retreating glaciers, that as many as 7 million ducks nested and bred each spring. At the same time, the seasonally flooded bottomland hardwood forests of the lower Mississippi valley were being leveled, diked, and cultivated to meet a soaring worldwide demand for soybeans.

The effort to protect these critical waterfowl breeding and wintering areas has become a race against time. The nation's freshwater wetlands have been disappearing at a staggering rate of 458,000 acres per year. Only an estimated 3 million of the 25 million acres of bottomland forests that once covered the lower Mississippi valley still remain. In the prairie pothole region, the fraction that still survives is vanishing at an estimated annual rate of 35,000 acres.

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Thus far, well over 2.5 million acres of vital wetlands have been preserved in Federal refuges in the upper Midwest and plains states. More than 300,000 acres of bottomland hardwood habitat have been added to the National Wildlife Refuge System in the Mississippi delta. "You can fly over the prairie pothole country of the Dakotas," says Fish and Wildlife Service land acquisition chief Walter McAllester, "and almost tell what was bought with Duck Stamp money and State waterfowl programs -- because that's mostly all that's left. The same thing goes for the bottomland hardwoods."

The clock is also ticking, say the experts, for key wintering and breeding areas jeopardized by development or other changes, and for special kinds of habitat needed by such ailing species as the black duck and the canvasback. And, as land values increase, Duck Stamp dollars don't stretch as far as they once did to protect increasingly scare and vulnerable wetlands. After a half century of helping to pay for such acquisitions, Duck Stamp dollars today are even more important to assure future dividends for both wildlife and people.

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Note: The colorful Duck Stamps may be purchased for $7.50 at most Post Offices and many national wildlife refuges, or ordered by mail for $8 (includes 50 cents postage and handling) from the U.S. Postal Service, Philatelic Sales Division, Washington, D.C. 20265-9997. The 50th anniversary (1984/85) stamp goes on sale July 2.

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